

Message Text

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SUBJ: KOREAN REACTION TO CARTER PRESS CONFERENCE

1. PRESIDENT-ELECT CARTER'S DECEMBER 21 PRESS CONFERENCE ON
WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS FROM KOREA GIVEN WIDE PLAY IN KOREAN MEDIA.
EDITORIAL COMMENT HAS BEEN SOMEWHAT AMBIVALENT, ALONG LINES OF
GOVERNMENT-OWNED KOREA HERALD, IN DECEMBER 24 ISSUE, WHICH NOTED
WITH APPROVAL THE CAUTIOUS APPROACH CALLED FOR BY THE PRESIDENT-
ELECT, WHILE POINTING OUT THE CONTINUED TENSIONS IN KOREA AND
THE IMPORTANCE OF U.S. FORCES HERE IN TERMS OF THE REGIONAL
POWER BALANCE. EDITORIAL CONCLUDED: "REALITIES THUS MAKE IT
TOO PREMATURE AND SERVE LITTLE PURPOSE TO FORESEE OR PREDICT
A PLAN FOR A U.S. KOREA PULLOUT. IT WON'T BE TOO LATE FOR
WASHINGTON TO DO SO WHEN THE OTHER SIDE, NORTH KOREA
AND ITS PATRONS, ACTUAL OR POTENTIAL, PROVES ITS BONAFIDE
READINESS TO FOREGO FORCE ONCE AND FOR ALL". COMMENTARY
SAME DAY BY NOMINALLY INDEPENDENT CHOSON ILBO AND CHUNGANG
ILBO, AND TONGA INBO, FOLLOWED SIMILAR PATTERN.

2. AS REGARDS GOVERNMENT REACTION, THERE HAS BEEN NO FORMAL
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STATEMENT. BLUE HOUSE SECRETARY, WHO HAS PROVEN TO BE AN
ACCURATE COMMENTATOR ON BLUE HOUSE MOOD, ASKED BY POL COUNSELOR
FOR COMMENT, SHRUGGED SHOULDERS, SAID ROKG WOULD PREFER TROOPS
REMAIN AND WOULD ARGUE AT MINIMUM FOR THEIR SLOW WITHDRAWAL,
USING JAPANESE TO SUPPORT ROK VIEWS, BUT THAT IN LAST ANALYSIS
KOREA WOULD OF COURSE HAVE TO ACCEPT CARTER ADMINISTRATION

DECISION. HE EMPHASIZED THAT PRESIDENT PAK WOULD NOT MAKE MAJOR CHANGES IN DOMESTIC POLITICAL APPROACH TO APPEASE U.S. AND WIN PROLONGATION OF TROOP PRESENCE.

3. SOME PRIVATE COMMENTS HAVE REFLECTED MORE OF THE TRADITIONAL KOREAN NERVOUSNESS ABOUT ANY CHANGE, REITERATING CHIEFLY NEED FOR US TROOPS TO STAY. HOWEVER, NDP CHAIRMAN YI CHOL SUNG TOLD EMBASSY EMPLOYEE EVENTUAL WITHDRAWAL APPEARED TO BE INEVITABLE, AND WHILE NOT DESIRED, IT WAS EVIDENTLY SOMETHING KOREA WOULD PROBABLY HAVE TO ACCEPT. ANOTHER NDP ASSEMBLYMAN INDICATED HIS GREATER CONCERN WAS FOR CONTINUED U.S. LOGISTIC SUPPORT FOR KOREAN MILITARY.

4. COMMENT: GIVEN KOREA'S HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT, ANY SHIFT IN EXTERNAL RELATIONSHIPS AND FORCES INDUCES CONSIDERABLE NERVOUSNESS, AND THE PRESENT SITUATION IS NO EXCEPTION. HOWEVER, THE GOVERNMENT SEEMS TO BE TRYING TO PERSUADE THE COUNTRY TO FACE PRESIDENT ELECT CARTER'S STATEMENT CALMLY AND REALISTICALLY AND THE REACTION TO DATE SUGGESTS THAT THE EFFORT MAY BE SUCCESSFUL.
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